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ABSTRACT

This paper examines findings from a study that investigated the reasons for high teacher attrition rates in South Carolina public schools. Surveys of 359 former teachers and interviews with respondents indicated that the primary issue in teacher attrition was lack of support for beginning teachers from the building and district level administrator. Support that was desired but not received fell into the areas of supportive environment, financial support, mentoring support, behavior management support, and workload/work role support, all areas over which administrators have some control. Teachers offered recommendations for the school system to support beginning teachers and keep them from leaving, including: continue efforts to incorporate changes to help all teachers succeed and remain in the profession (e.g., increased security, better pay, smaller class size, and mentoring); increase opportunities for communication among all parties involved in the educational process; and give new teachers the opportunity to develop a professional knowledge base and the time needed to act and reflect upon that knowledge. (SM)

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"Administrative Accountability and the Novice Teacher"

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Administrative Accountability and the Novice Teacher

Statistics abound concerning the alarming exodus rate of teachers from our nation's public schools, but little has been done to reverse these numbers. State Department of Education statistics reveal that up to 33% of beginning teachers leave public schools in South Carolina within their first five years of service to the profession. With fewer individuals entering the teaching field, rising retirement numbers and the growth of school age populations, teacher shortages are a growing concern among school administrators. One study (Eggen, 2001) focused on the survey of 359 former South Carolina teachers, in order to examine reasons for the high rate of teacher attrition. With the return of completed surveys, a surprising 69% volunteered to be interviewed about their reasons for leaving the profession. Analysis of survey and interview responses revealed that lack of support for the beginner, in particular from school administrators, was overwhelmingly the dominant factor in decisions to leave the profession. This article addresses implications for school administrators wishing to improve the retention rate of novice teachers.

Problem Areas

According to the findings of this study, the primary issue in teacher attrition is lack of support for the beginning teacher from the building and district level administrator. Support that was desired but not received fell into several areas over which administrators have some control. These areas include: supportive environment, financial support, behavior management support and workload/work role support.

Non-Supportive Environment

An area most often mentioned by surveyed teachers is the general lack of support within their school community. Many former teachers surveyed entered the teaching profession with the expectation that school administrators would be more like family than boss, more mentor than evaluator. Beginning teachers expected administrators to be "on their side", but often found themselves either ignored or embroiled in confrontation with those administrators. In one scenario administrators were accused of not caring, avoiding visibility in the school, staying out of classrooms, and giving little feedback to new teachers. One such survey respondent commented, "I was lucky if I caught one glimpse of my principal each week."

A second scenario was that of administrators who appeared to be more focused on test scores and district mandates to the perceived detriment of teaching and learning. In this situation, administrators were sometimes seen as being hostile and confrontational with teachers. A former middle school teacher commented,

> My school district was not into teaching children and building self-confidence. I thought that the administration would want to see students learning and happy. They only seem to care about test scores!

Most of the new teachers reported not receiving the support they expected and felt necessary to their success. One former elementary teacher who went on to teach at the college level said that most of the teachers he knows feels that in the school hierarchy, "...we are somewhere above cockroaches and below the custodian."

Lack of Financial Support

A second area of concern is that of financial support. Beginning teachers assumed they would be given adequate supplies and materials necessary for implementation of new curriculum

approaches that were mandated by the district, only to learn that this was not the case. Some talked about not having basic items such as textbooks, chalk and paper, and using their own money to provide these items. A special education teacher interviewed said,

> I had to buy my own materials, such as workbooks, in order to teach the skills my 12 self-contained students needed, plus I had no assistant. When I asked my principal for help, she ignored my requests and simply avoided me.

Lack of Mentoring Support

A third area of perceived lack of support concerned that of assigned mentors for the newcomer. Some thought that on either a formal or informal basis, they would have the help of a more experienced teacher who would take the time necessary to provide guidance for them. The teachers expected and longed for a network of support that did not exist for them. One former high school teacher said that,

> When I asked my co-worker, who taught the same subjects, for help and guidance during the first few weeks, I was told to just do it my way. I felt truly isolated and helpless in my teaching efforts.

Behavioral Management Problems

A fourth area of concern is that of behavior management of students. A former elementary teacher in special education said,

> The rules and procedures in the handbook were not followed, as they should have been. This made it very difficult for the classroom teachers to maintain an effective discipline procedure in the classroom. My administrator did not attend

IEP meetings, and when asked for help told me, "Don't worry about teaching them, just keep the kids quiet and in the room."

Typical of the survey/interview group, a former teacher interviewed told a story of a student who became violent while they were in the hall discussing a classroom problem:

> When a student misbehaves, I want something done, it's as simple as that. I'm not talking about little things. Recently I took a [male] student out in the hall because of [inappropriate] comments he made to a girl. He got mad and punched a locker, missing my head by inches. Nothing was done to him. His parents came in and said he was having a hard time at home, so they [the administrators] overlooked the incident.

Workload Support

A final area of concern is that of workload. Many former teachers expressed surprise at the workload, including class size, paperwork, mandated in-service, new program implementation and extra assignments in addition to teaching duties. Many complained of never having enough time to get everything done, despite working 50-70 hour weeks. Comments pointed toward the completion of paperwork and attendance of meetings as eclipsing time needed to plan and prepare to teach. One former primary grades teacher expressed frustration this way:

> I am currently teaching again in another state, however, I am quitting at the end of this school year. We are over worked and underpaid. The workload is extremely heavy. I work all the time – evenings and weekends, and I never get everything done.

Summary

Throughout the survey and interview processes, recommendations were offered by participants in answer to the question of what the school system could have done to keep them as teachers. These suggestions addressed the lack of support the novice teachers faced in the teaching profession.

Community Support

The first area of need identifies the lack of support that the new teacher feels, in general. If it "takes a village" to raise a child, then perhaps it also takes a village to support a new teacher. Novices are often isolated, having no time and no one to talk with about the situations in which they find themselves. Establishment of a support community which meets on a regular basis could create an environment where teachers could engage in discussions, reflection activities, common reading lists, book talks, retreats and other collaborative learning activities. If experienced teachers, as well as new teachers are involved, all could benefit from such an endeavor. Novices would see that the problems they experience have been faced and dealt with in a successful manner by others. All teachers would have a forum whereby concerns could be voiced and addressed.

Mentoring Support

Mixing mentorship with the evaluation process may make the mentor less responsive to new teacher concerns and issues, due to focus on evaluative issues. The master teacher should serve as guide, instructor, coach and model for the novice during the first three years of service, a critical time in the novice's career. This would allow for more freedom of communication between the two teachers, without fear of recrimination when evaluation time arrives. A few

participants in this study recommended that administrators and experienced teachers be given mentoring instruction, as this is a role that doesn't come naturally to all educators.

Workload Support

Also needed in this community would be additional numbers of support personnel to help address the issue of work overload. Easy access to additional special education teachers, English as second language teachers and guidance counselors could assist novices in their work with special needs, mainstreamed children. Administrative assistants, who could help reduce secretarial duties that burden new teachers, would also be of help. With an organized community of supporters, the novice would not be alone and isolated in his/her new role as teacher. One individual compared the teacher who has just joined the workforce with the intern, recently graduated from medical school. She analogized:

> A brand new graduate of medical school would not be left on his own to hang out a shingle and practice medicine. He has a lengthy time of internship where he works closely with others, while being mentored. New teachers need an entire year of internship in my opinion. The new person (perhaps at a reduced rate of pay) could share a classroom with a master teacher for that first year. The intern would not be an assistant, but a real teacher with responsibilities, under the guidance of someone who knows what they are doing. This would give the mentor and novice real time together, something our mentoring programs today cannot give.

Behavior Management Support

Another area of need involves the new teacher's frustration with classroom behavior management. Novices are usually expected to be good classroom managers from the first day on the job, without benefit of any real experience in this area. As student teachers they may have been put in ideal situations where excellent, experienced classroom managers are present to make sure that everything goes well for the student. More likely than not, the student teacher never had the opportunity to observe how the experienced teacher arrived at this point with his or her class. Former teachers spoke of "accountability for all", explaining that they needed help to shoulder the burden of behavior management from administrators who failed to reinforce "zero tolerance" rhetoric with discipline policies, consistently enforced. The focus of this type of program could be of the community-building variety as opposed to reward and punishment scenarios that sometimes fall short of success (Glasser, 1993; Kohn, 1993). Beginning teachers need instruction, coaching and support in learning how to establish a discipline policy that will work for them.

Work Role Support

The final area of need involves initial assignment for the new teacher. Novices are often called upon to do as much work or more than the experienced teacher. Initial assignment for the beginner should be carefully analyzed by the building administrator. Reduced class size, low numbers of mainstreamed children with special needs, extra time allotted for planning and meeting with mentors would be of great benefit to the new teacher. Also, paperwork, extracurricular and committee assignments should be held to an absolute minimum. State and district administrators should consider the stressful impact of new programs, stringent evaluations, additional paperwork and the stress of testing on the beginning teacher. These

burdens should be reduced or eliminated wherever possible while the novice becomes oriented to their new career.

Recommendations

Throughout the Eggen study, suggestions were offered by participants as to changes that could be made in order to retain new teachers in their chosen profession. These include the following:

- Continue efforts to incorporate changes that will help all teachers, both new and experienced, to be successful and remain in the teaching profession (i.e. increased security measures, better pay, smaller class size, mentoring programs).
- Increase opportunities for communication among all parties involved in the educational process, including teachers, new and experienced, students, parents, and administrators, giving the beginning teacher a voice in the on-going changes being made in education.
- Give the new teacher the opportunity to develop a professional knowledge base and the time needed to act and reflect upon that knowledge.

When some teachers choose to leave the profession, this is not necessarily a negative circumstance. Some individuals find they are not happy or well suited to the work involved. However, when large numbers of teachers leave the profession in which they have just begun to work, something is wrong. According to this study, many left because they did not have the support they needed to grow into the role of teacher. This study indicates that a network of support needs to be put in place for the new teacher, if teacher retention is to improve.

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